COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THE PLURAL VISION OF DISCOURSE

Zhang Longxi
City University of Hong Kong

Keywords: aesthetic historicism, influence study, parallel study, identity crisis, Eurocentrism, East-West studies, World Literature.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Aesthetic Historicism, French Influence Study, and American Parallelism
3. The Discourse of Triumph and of Crisis
4. A Global Perspective and Plural Vision
5. Conclusion
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

UNESCO – EOLSS SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Summary

Comparative literature was established in nineteenth-century Europe as a discipline of literary study transcending monolingual national traditions. Before World War II, the French approach of influence study predominated in the field with emphasis on factual contacts and international relations, the influence and reputation of important writers abroad. In postwar America, with many comparatists emigrated from Europe and the ideology of nationalism discredited, a new approach emerged to promote a more inclusive model of parallel study of different literatures without the positivistic notion of factual contacts and relations, and with emphasis on literary and aesthetic values of texts. This liberal-humanistic approach in comparative literature was increasingly displaced by literary theory and cultural studies since the 1970s, but the eclipse of literature as the center of reference has created an identity crisis for comparative literature. Part of the problem is that comparative literature is still largely Eurocentric, while there has been a tremendous increase of interest in non-Western literatures and cultures. Once comparative literature frees itself from Eurocentric limitations and assumes a truly global perspective, new areas of pursuit and development will open up and will offer comparatists not only new challenges, but also the possibility of new insights and achievements.

1. Introduction

Emerged as an approach or methodology of literary study that drew inspiration from such scientific studies of nature as comparative zoology or comparative anatomy with an imbedded conviction in the efficacy of Darwinian evolutionary theory, comparative literature was first and foremost a distinctly European endeavor in the nineteenth century. The Romantic notion of nature as an organic unity with different species encouraged scholars to view literary works as related to one another beyond linguistic

and national boundaries, with comparable themes and features, to form some kind of unity of literary expressions and aesthetic sensibilities. By definition, therefore, comparative literature is an intellectual pursuit that goes beyond the boundaries of linguistically uniform and politically unified national literatures.

Comparatists are polyglots with a wide range of interest and knowledge of different literatures. Given the geographic, linguistic, and cultural proximities, it is natural that the early work of comparative literature concentrated on the interrelationships among European literatures; and even today much of comparative literature still remains largely Euro-American despite the many changes and transformations it has gone through since its early start in the nineteenth century. The best scholarly work in comparative literature, some of the classic works, such as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Robert Ernst Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*, and many other works of a similar stature and influence, are all concerned with Western literature. More recently, however, limitations of this largely Eurocentric or West-centered discipline become increasingly apparent, and comparatists have started to go beyond the West, while they see comparative literature in the traditional sense has come to a sort of dead-end. There have appeared some works, though few, which have made significant contributions to comparative literature from a truly global perspective and offered opportunities for further development.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **10 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

Auerbach, Erich. (1953). *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 563 pp. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [A classic work that discusses stylistic and various other features of Western literature in a comparative framework.]

Auerbach, Erich. (1959). *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays*, 249 pp. Trans. Ralph Manheim et al. New York: Meridian Books. [An important work in comparative scholarship, including a discussion of Vico and aesthetic historicism.]

Bassnett, Susan. (1993). *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, 183 pp. Oxford: Blackwell. [A recent introduction to comparative literature, in which the author declares the death of the discipline but proposes radical forms of cultural studies as a new, "post-European" model of comparative literature.]

Curtius, Ernst Robert. (1953). *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 662 pp. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [An influential classic work in comparative scholarship that discusses various exempla, themes, and their historical sources in European literature.]

Damrosch, David. (2003). *What Is World Literature?* 324 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [A recent discussion of world literature with emphasis on non-European traditions.]

Etiemble, René. (1963). *Comparaison n'est pas raison*. 118 pp. Paris : Gallimard. [An unusual work by a French scholar who attacks Eurocentrism and argues for an all-encompassing global vision of comparative literature.]

Guillén, Claudio. (1993). *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 450 pp. Trans. Cola Franzen. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. [A recent and probably the most comprehensive and informative introduction to the history and substance of comparative literature.]

Kernan, Alvin. (1990). *The Death of Literature*, 230 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. [One of the earlier lamentations of the disappearance of literature from the center of critical attention in literary studies.]

Miner, Earl. (1990). *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*, 259 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [A discussion of poetics or literary theory from the perspective of East-West comparative studies.]

Saussy, Haun. (1993). *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, 296 pp. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. [One of the few important works in East-West comparative studies.]

Saussy, Haun. (ed., 2006). *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 261 pp. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. [A state-of-the-field report of comparative literature, including a collection of essays that discuss comparative literature from a variety of perspectives.]

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (2003). *Death of a Discipline*, 128 pp. New York: Columbia University Press. [A critique of traditional comparative literature and an advocacy of a “new comparative literature” defined against Eurocentrism and the tyranny of the market.]

Zhang Longxi. (1992). *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, 238 pp. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. [A discussion of issues of language, understanding and interpretation from the perspective of East-West studies.]

Zhang Longxi. (2005). *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*, 256 pp. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. [A study of allegory and allegorical interpretation from the perspective of East-West comparative studies.]

Zhang Longxi (2007). *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures*, 138 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. [An argument for and contribution to East-West comparative studies based on the author’s Alexander Lectures delivered at the University of Toronto in spring 2005.]

Biographical Sketch

Zhang Longxi was born in Chengdu, China, in 1947. He received his MA in English from Peking University in Beijing, China, in 1981, and his Ph. D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., USA, in 1989. His major field of study is east-west comparative literature.

He has taught at Peking University, the University of California, Riverside, and currently the City University of Hong Kong in Kowloon, Hong Kong. His major publications include *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (University of Toronto Press, 2007, Toronto). He has a wide range of interests in classical Chinese literature, Shakespeare and seventeenth-century English literature, literary theory and criticism, and East-West studies.

Professor Zhang is currently Chair Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation at the City University of Hong Kong.

UNESCO – EOLSS
SAMPLE CHAPTERS